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ABSTRACT

Two groups of American adolescents of Greek descent (12-15 year olds N=90 and 16-18 year olds N=166) at an Orthodox Christian Camp in Greece responded to the Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale (1965). Campers took the test on the first day of camp (pretest) and then two weeks later at the camp's conclusion (posttest). All subjects showed a significant increase in self-esteem scores at the end of their camp experience with the older group scoring slightly higher on both the pre- and posttests. Improved self-esteem scores might arise from: (1) the various therapeutic elements of the camp; (2) the independence felt from an extended stay away from home; (3) campers responding favorably to the demand characteristics of the camp; or (4) an initial suppression of self-esteem among campers at the camp's onset caused by separation anxiety. These factors could also explain differences in test scores between the two groups when one realizes that the older children were more prepared for introspection and self-exploration than the younger campers. (RJM)

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THE EFFECT OF A CAMP EXPERIENCE ON SELF ESTEEM

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ABSTRACT

The effect of a camp experience on adolescents' self esteem was investigated in a study of two different age groups: 12-15 year olds (N=90) and 16-18 year olds (N=166). The study was conducted at a camp in Greece. The subjects were American adolescents of Greek descent. Pretests and posttests were used to measure self esteem. It was hypothesized that the camp experience would increase the self esteem of the adolescents. Results indicate that the adolescents of both age groups experienced an increase in self esteem. However, the older age group was found to score significantly higher than the younger age group on self esteem at both measurement times.

INTRODUCTION

A milestone in the development of an adolescent often involves going away from home for the first time. Many times a camp experience provides a youngster's first experience with independence. Through encounters with the varied demands of a new and social environment, young people develop confidence, learn social skills and increase their self esteem (American Camping Association, 1992-1993).

There are thousands of types, lengths, and sponsorships of camps. The focus of the present investigation was a camp program sponsored by the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese for American children of Greek descent, called Ionian Village. The camp experience takes place in Greece on the Ionian Sea. Ionian Village emphasizes an Orthodox Christian experience, with the goal of enhancing campers' sense of closeness to God.

The main goal of Ionian Village is to enable the campers to express their innermost thoughts, feelings and concerns by providing them with a warm, open and loving environment. This catharsis is highly encouraged. The peacefulness that is created by the white washed setting, the sound of the crashing waves and the star filled sky, all contribute to an atmosphere that facilitates safety, trust, and contemplation.

An integral part of the daily activities included "Orthodox Life" sessions. The cabin occupants, their counselors, a priest and a seminarian would meet in the pines. This was a discussion group where the campers would share their anxieties, self doubts and guilt. Experiencing such emotions can be very painful and devastating, however, doing so serves a useful purpose when it promotes increased reflection and evaluation of potential consequences of future actions. In these sessions, many children divulged their deep, darkest secrets, including revelations of experiences with rape, sexual and physical abuse, and eating disorders.

In recent years, several investigators have explored influences on the development of adolescent self esteem. Previous research (Aries and Moorehead, 1989; Phinney and Alipuria, 1990) suggests that efforts to promote healthy psychological development among young ethnic group members should focus not only on promoting ethnic awareness and identity development, but at least equally on enhancing self esteem. Phinney and Chavira (1992) looked at whether having an achieved ethnic identity enhances the individual's self esteem, or conversely, whether high self esteem leads to ethnic identity achievement. They found that self esteem and ethnic identity were significantly related to each other, however their methods did not permit a determination of causal direction. Josselson (1987) suggested that it may be that adolescents with high self esteem are more likely to engage in searching and questioning about their cultural background. Since most work to date on this topic has been cross-sectional, this investigation used a pre-post longitudinal format to assess the impact of an ethnicity awareness enhancement experience on adolescent self esteem.

Verkuyten (1988) suggested that adolescents are mainly concerned with judgements by significant others in their immediate social environment. If these judgements are positive, it can be expected that they will form a foundation for positive self-appraisal. He hypothesized that adolescents from ethnic minorities may pay greater attention to people from their own ethnic group. By interviewing the adolescents and distributing the Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale (RSE), he found that adolescents from ethnic minorities focus more on the perceived judgements of family members than on nonfamily members in fashioning their self-appraisals. The study indicated that these significant others' perceived judgement correlated significantly with individuals' sense of self. The shared ethnic group membership here might be expected to enhance the salience of camp counselor and peer opinions. This might increase according to their influence on campers' self esteem.

In the present investigation, the camp's effect on participants' self esteem was assessed by comparing self concept measures taken before and after the camp experience. Separate pre-post test comparisons were conducted for younger and older campers.

METHOD

Two hundred and forty-eight American children of Greek descent, aged 12-18 years, served as subjects in this study. Children were grouped according to age. The younger group ranged from 12-15 years ($n=90$). The older group ranged from 16-18 ($n=166$). The children were all participants at a Greek Orthodox summer camp held in Greece.

Procedure

The Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale (1965) was administered to the children to provide pretest and posttest measures of self esteem. The scale was distributed on the first day of camp and then two weeks later, on the last day of camp. The survey was confidential and anonymous.

RESULTS

Pretest and posttest self esteem scores were calculated for all participants by adding the directionally adjusted item values. For the entire sample, pretest and posttest scores were significantly correlated ($r=.95$, $p<.001$). A repeated measures t-test for the total sample showed a significant increase from pre to posttest (pretest $x=77.47$, s.d. $=16.24$ versus posttest $x=80.54$, s.d. $=13.36$; $N=245$; $t=8.94$, $p<.001$, d.f. $=244$). Separate t-test analyses revealed consistent significant self esteem score increases over time across the two sexes and the two age groups.

A two-way ANOVA (sex x age group) was performed on both pre and posttest scores. Members of the older group scored significantly higher on both the pre and posttest than members of the younger group (pretest: $x=79.53$, s.d. $=17.31$, $n=161$ versus $x=73.60$, s.d. $=13.82$, $n=89$; $F=7.69$, d.f. $=248$, $p<.01$; posttest: $x=81.64$,

s.d. = 14.53, n = 164 versus x = 78.25, s.d. = 10.66, n = 87; F = 3.69, d.f. = 249, p < .05). No significant sex nor interaction effects were obtained.

DISCUSSION

The self esteem measure demonstrated high test-retest reliability, suggesting it was a stable measure of individual differences. Despite the measure's cross-temporal consistency, it was sensitive to change within all four subgroups of the sample (sex x age grouping). Subjects showed a significant increase in self esteem scores at the end of their camp experience.

This pre-posttest change may be largely attributable to the various therapeutic elements of the camp. Students were provided supportive relationships with counselors who were overtly socially reinforcing, and stimulated mutual encouragement among their counselors. Campers were helped to share difficult private experiences in a context of empathy and acceptance, and were encouraged to adopt a perspective of forgiveness and optimism.

In addition, it is possible that nonspecific factors operating in the situation contributed to the self esteem enhancement. For example, the fact that the experience offered many campers their first opportunity to be away from home for an extended period of time may account for the self esteem change. Facing various daily challenges independently may well have increased campers' perceived self efficacy. This increased sense of personal competence may have elevated posttest self esteem scores.

It is also conceivable that the measured self esteem change was due less to personal growth related to the camp experience than to a temporary reduction of self esteem at the pretest assessment. It is possible that the initial days of camp temporarily reduced campers' feelings of competence, but that experience in the new setting allowed previous feelings of confidence to return. Therefore, the favorable pre-posttest comparison could have been a function of fleeting suppression of normal self esteem level at pretest, rather than an elevation of self esteem at posttest. Further research could assess this possibly through use of dual pretest measures, one administered well in advance at the arrival of camp, and one given as it was in this study.

A final alternative explanation of these self esteem findings is that they were due to measurement of reactivity or practice effects. It might be that in describing themselves more favorable on the posttest, participants were merely responding to demand characteristics of the camp or to a general tendency to respond more favorably upon readministration of a self esteem measure. Further research could address this possibly through inclusion of a matched control group.

There are various possible explanations for why the older age group scored slightly higher on both the pre and posttests than members of the younger group. Increases in self esteem have generally been associated with the aging process in adolescents, because age is related to increases in both actual and perceived competence. The results here may be attributable to this general developmental trend.

One reason for the differential self esteem change could be that the camp experience may not have been the same for the younger children because they may have come with different expectations of camp. While the younger group anticipated mainly fun and games, the older group was more prepared for introspection and self exploration.

As a consequence, the experience may have had a greater beneficial impact on the older campers.

Another factor that may have influenced the present findings is that for many of the younger campers, this was their first time away from home. This may well have caused greater feelings of loneliness and insecurity among members of the younger group. This could have temporarily suppressed self esteem scores for the younger group more so than for the older group who presumably had more experience with separation from family. It is conceivable that for the younger children, the opportunity to explore and enjoy their cultural background did not mean as much because they were fighting other battles, such as loneliness and separation anxiety. Perhaps the younger children looked at the cultural differences being explored during camp with fear and trepidation, as opposed to the awe and fascination experienced by the older children. This might also account for why at posttesting the younger subjects showed less increase in self esteem.

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